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Hirschhorn, Daniel

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# Weak Managers and the Plight of White-Collar Workers

Daniel Hirschhorn, JD; MBA

## Abstract

Far too many employees are unhappy at work. Today, one of the major problems--resulting from weak, callous, dispassionate, greedy managers and leaders--is the great number of workers, including white-collar ones, who are grossly underemployed, underpaid, and maltreated by management.

"God grant that men of principle shall be our principal men."  
— Thomas Jefferson

In America and elsewhere, we continue to have a growing problem with an imbalanced and unfair economy, especially with respect to labor and jobs. As Senator Bernie Sanders recently wrote, "The issue of wealth and income inequality is the great moral issue of our time, it is the great economic issue of our time, and it is the great political issue of our time."<sup>1</sup> Many others fully agree. Shrinking incomes have led to a dwindling middle class. Hence, a great many Americans are frustrated and depressed.

Today, far too many workers are grossly under-employed, underpaid, and maltreated on the job. Organizations do not make human resource policies and decisions per se—*people* do. Obviously, management determines hiring, salary, job richness, and other working conditions as a function of labor supply and demand. While some may think that only less-educated working class (i.e., blue collar) employees are the ones being treated unfairly and with little respect on the job, it is common for management also to marginalize white-collar workers—ultimately leading to their frustration, depression, and economic suffering. It is important to look at some macroeconomic data first: It is true that the working class employees in America have experienced great joblessness. Similarly, recent studies show that 31 percent of recent college grads are *unemployed*,<sup>2</sup> and 44 percent are *underemployed*.<sup>3</sup> More than 15 percent of the "professional workforce" was not employed full-time (March 2015). Furthermore, several studies show that less than half of employed college graduates work in jobs that even require a degree. "For many workers, especially for the young, middle class jobs are less stable, less desirable, and less secure than they used to be. It is harder to keep good jobs once you have them."<sup>4</sup> For decades, an

oversupply of white-collar labor has created a situation where fewer jobs are available for them. Hence, salaries are depressed and workers are more readily fired by management.

The “lower-middle class” is primarily comprised of lower-level, white-collar workers. These workers typically have a college education. The median annual income for these workers is about \$45,000. And many, including the likes of attorneys and professors, are terribly underemployed and underpaid. For example, adjunct professors with dozens of years of work and teaching experience typically earn less than \$15,000 (for five classes) each year!

It is often very difficult for many people to get satisfying good jobs. Once a job is obtained, a great many workers become quite unhappy in the workplace. Gallup’s “State of the American Workplace report” (2017) concluded that 70% of American workers are not engaged in their job. Half of US workers have left a job because they hated their boss. Gallup also reports that only 18 percent of managers at U.S. jobs had “high talent” for leadership skills, including the ability to encourage accountability in the workplace, motivate workers, and build relationships with them.<sup>5</sup> “I hate my boss” returns 439,000 results on Google. In one study, *Forbes* magazine reported that over 31% of Americans surveyed stated they were seeking other employment because they do not like their boss and, similarly, 31% of those surveyed stated they were leaving their job due to a lack of empowerment. According to *Harvard Business Review*, one study found that “60% of employees working for the U.S. federal government are miserable...because they have bad bosses.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether in business or government, many of those who get far ahead in their career and reach powerful management-leadership positions regularly seem to follow a behavioral model of hyper-aggression and selfishness. For example, Donald Trump actually admitted at one campaign rally, “My whole life I’ve been greedy, greedy, greedy. I’ve grabbed all the money I could get. I’m so greedy.” This attitude certainly cannot lead to significant concern and compassion for employees and other stakeholders.

Descriptions of management and leadership shortcomings, wrongdoing, and best practices are the subjects of thousands of books written by the greatest experts on “team building,” “participative management,” “corporate democracy,” and the like. While the scholarship on workplace leadership and management theory continues to foster the critical importance of “empowering” workers for improved productivity, top managers, including those in government, rarely seem to follow that advice well—or at all! Administrators commonly turn away from the real needs of their workers and stakeholders.



Executives often create environments that undermine worker motivation and discourage discretionary effort. Countless studies performed for decades have shown that the basis of *ineffective* leadership is unfairness, controlling and authoritarian attitudes, lack of compassion, and an inability to communicate well. Among other problems becoming manifest, this leads to employee dissatisfaction, high turnover, and low performance. In *Forbes On-Line*, Eric Jackson writes that weak managers “ruthlessly eliminate anyone who isn’t completely behind them... Hesitant (mid-) managers have a choice: Get with the plan or leave.”<sup>7</sup> Warren Bennis gets to the heart of the matter when he writes, “Successful leadership is ...about a set of attributes. First and foremost is character.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, today’s typical managers need much more character. That is, managers should be expected to act civilly at least. Failure to do so is highly counterproductive. Gary Hamel writes in *Harvard Business Review*: “Finally, there’s the cost of tyranny. The problem isn’t the occasional control freak; it’s the hierarchical structure that systematically disempowers lower-level employees.”<sup>9</sup> Authors Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman write: “People don’t leave jobs, they leave managers. If employees don’t get along with their managers, don’t like them, or don’t respect them, they will leave a company ... A bad manager is a big factor in employee performance. A good manager, no matter the salary, will inspire loyalty.”<sup>10</sup>

At the relatively extreme end of wrongful behavior—beyond basic misdeeds, incompetence, harassment, and mean-spiritedness—are actual *crimes* in the white-collar workplace committed by management executives and others in both government and the private sector. The Department of Justice defines white-collar crime as “those classes of non-violent illegal activities which principally involve traditional notions of deceit, deception, concealment, manipulation, breach of trust, subterfuge or illegal circumvention.” The sheer volume of white-collar crime is vast. Several organizations estimate that the financial losses from white-collar crimes cost the United States as much as \$600 billion per year. Corporate crime inflicts far more damage on society than does all street crime combined!

"Corporate crime poses a significant threat to the welfare of the community. Given the pervasive presence of corporations in a wide range of activities in our society, and the impact of their actions on a much wider group of people than are affected by individual action, the potential for both economic and physical harm caused by a corporation is great.”<sup>11</sup>

Many managers seem to believe that “managing” people means being critical, stingy, deceitful, and punitive to their subordinates. When top management enables a toxic human relations’ environment in an organization, that dysfunctional culture flows downward through all levels of management and beyond. In fact, many executives are seen as ruthless and selfish—speaking and behaving improperly— simply because they believe they can get away with it. Typically, management often does not even want to hear about any problems or concerns from employees. In fact, just asking and talking about many topics associated with work life is taboo. And talking about an organization problem to outsiders is often lethal.

With respect to whether or not they are decent human beings and/or have a talent for true leadership, many of our government and corporate “leaders” are largely failures. Throughout history, many executives have been terrible for the welfare of their employees, communities, and countries. Many have been, and remain, very incompetent, arrogant, dishonest, and even sadistic. Clearly, the world has always experienced dictatorial government leaders whose egocentric thirst for conquest and enslavement has led to war.

Some people’s wrongful, harmful actions often are undertaken simply for the sheer pleasure of being cruel. That’s why they do wrong—they actually ENJOY it! *Psychological Science* online reports that for some people, “cruelty can be pleasurable, even exciting.” (Buckels 2013). Recent research suggests that everyday sadism is real and more common than we might think. A *Google* search for “People are sadistic” returns 84,600 results. “Women” get more hits than men. Oddly, “Why are people sadistic?” only returns 14 results!

Perhaps their central goal is simply to enhance their own careers, but it also is likely that many leaders-managers enjoy abusing their authority and power by exercising mean-spiritedness and bullying (a form of emotional violence) over their subordinates and other stakeholders. The emotional effects of poor treatment on the job and worse, unfair termination, can be devastating on workers. Workplace bullying is very common today and is a complex social dynamic. In the Workplace Bullying Institute’s (Zogby’s) 2014 national *Workplace Bullying Survey*, workplace bullying was defined as “repeated mistreatment; abusive conduct that is: threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; work sabotage; and/or verbal abuse.” Tens of millions of workers are bullied each year. 72% of employers deny, discount, encourage, or defend workplace bullying.<sup>12</sup> One psychiatric model concludes that managers deplete their subordinate’s “social capital” when they degrade and attack them. Negative social capital can compromise workplace relationships, including magnifying inhibitions and causing conflicting, diluted communication. Furthermore, the lack of social capital experienced by victims (i.e., employees) serves to maintain them in their current subordinate role and prevents them from gaining social and organizational status. Of course, sexual harassment is a main type of bullying. Bullies are angry people and are essentially selfish and mean-spirited. At a psychological level, bullies simply have little or no conscience; hence, they are likely to be sadistic.

Some people simply are mean-spirited in the workplace for some intrinsic or other reason. This is also evident from recounted reports of the common misdeeds of corporate and government leaders and the grievances and lawsuits brought by employees and other stakeholders.

It often feels like society is not prevailing very well over “evil doers” and their destructive deeds and drive toward chaos. Surely, this is evidence of what Sigmund Freud firmly believed: most of what people do has an aggressive, selfish (ego-driven), basis. He wrote, “The tendency to aggression is an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man and... constitutes the most powerful obstacle to (civilized) culture.” (Freud 1946). Positive, civilized culture is comprised of well-functioning institutions, including the workplace.

It costs managers and leaders nothing to assert emotional intelligence and treat their subordinates and stakeholders with respect, honesty, fairness, kindness, and humanity. Many managers should choose to be far more civil and generous to their employees in all fields of endeavor. And that would be a profitable investment.

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